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## Populism: People Power and the Canadian Armed Forces

Major Peter Horan

### JCSP 48

#### Exercise Solo Flight

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**Populism: People Power and the Canadian Armed Forces**

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## INTRODUCTION

Francis Fukuyama called the end of the 20th Century, after the fall of communism and the Soviet Union and the rise of the information age “the end of history.” A supposed new global peace and expanding economic prosperity with information, social interactions, and commerce taking place on the new information superhighway promised to make war and upsets to the rules-based international order a thing of the past. The post-Cold War years of the 1990’s saw unprecedented economic expansion among Western democracies, and the relative lack of major conflicts ushered in a new peace dividend and popularization of neoliberal policies. These policies promoted privatization, deregulation (particularly of financial markets), free trade, and government actions that disproportionately benefited corporations and the upper strata of income earners.

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the rise of religious extremism in many Western nations, this peace dividend was shattered as security, defence, and intelligence establishments were re-invigorated and prioritized to combat this perceived threat and to support coalition military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This proceeded in the wake of the dot com bubble and while the housing boom and mortgage securitization by the world’s biggest investment banks set up the greatest economic shock to the middle class since the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> This shock to European and North American nations was severe, and the ensuing bailouts of the financial sectors

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Gertler and Simon Gilchrist, "What Happened: Financial Factors in the Great Recession," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 32, no. 3 (2018). 9.

(perceived as the top one percent) indirectly gave rise to the Tea Party/Occupy Wall Street movements, right-wing authoritarian parties in Europe, and the modern populist movement that endures today. More recent populist developments include the rise of Donald Trump and the QAnon cult, Black Lives Matter and the right-wing response to it, Brexit, rising right-wing populist authoritarianism in many Western democracies, as well as COVID-19 denialism/anti-vax movements.

Canada has also witnessed its share of populist flare ups in recent years, including the rise of the People's Party of Canada (PPC), anti-COVID restriction protests,<sup>2</sup> and the Ottawa Freedom Convoy of 2022. A related but distinct rise in right-wing extremism in Canada has also recently come to the forefront with several highly-publicized incidents with a Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) nexus, culminating with the release of the final report of the Minister of National Defence (MND) Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination.<sup>3</sup> While this report's findings and recommendations should rightfully be of significant concern to the Department of National Defence (DND) and the CAF and are indeed a threat to the CAF's long-term mandate, they do not encapsulate the chief *populist* threat to the CAF's mandate.

This paper will argue that populism is a threat to the CAF's mandate not in terms of violence (i.e. right-wing) or the systemic racism/discrimination that it may drive, but rather in sowing a growing divide between the various internal "classes" driven both by internal CAF issues as well as broader societal factors. First, populism will be defined for

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<sup>2</sup> Leyland Cecco, "Canada's Covid Protests Highlight Rise of Rightwing Populist Movements," *The Guardian*, Feb 1, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/canada-protests-covidvaccines-mandates-rightwing-movement>.

<sup>3</sup> Department of National Defence, *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination – Final Report* (Ottawa: 2022).

these purposes and contrasted with right-wing extremism through a literature review, and placed within the broader movement afoot in Western democracies. Next, Canada's nascent populist uprisings up to the current COVID-19 times, along with their link to social media, will be placed in appropriate context, and how Canada can take preventative steps to minimize. Populism within the CAF, as a microcosm of Canadian society, will then be explored, with current misconduct, racism, and recruiting/ retention crises presented as the chief populist threats to the CAF's long-term mandate, along with leadership focus areas to blunt their effects.

### **WHAT IS POPULISM?**

Populism as a phenomenon within political philosophies is generally agreed upon in literature to have originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the United States with the People's Party (an obvious inspiration to the People's Party of Canada, founded in 2018).<sup>4</sup> It has been manifested in the years since on both sides of the left-right political spectrum, with the former in power in several Latin American countries in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, while the latter is largely credited for the electoral success of Donald Trump, the Leave campaign for the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum to exit the European Union, and Victor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary and the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party in Greece. Common to both sides, Graves and Smith propose the following definition of populism that works well in the context of this paper, particularly since these authors wrote on "northern populism" within Canada: "Populism is a strategy for gaining power which has two essential ingredients: 1) a belief that there is a corrupt elite,

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<sup>4</sup> Tjitske Akkerman, "Populism and Democracy: Challenge Or Pathology?" *Acta Politica* 38, no. 2 (2003). 2.

and 2) a belief that power should be restored to “the people” ”.<sup>5</sup> Key within this definition is the term “belief,” which makes implicit that the ideas and policies (such as they are) within a populist movement may not always be supported by evidence and facts, and may contain a sizeable emotional element. This “thinness” of populist ideology, as described by Mudde and Rovira, can result in populist ideologies attaching or morphing into other, more fully-developed “thick” political philosophies, i.e. socialism, fascism, authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup>

One well-developed lens through which to view populism’s political influences, is that which borrows the microeconomic language of *demand-side* vs. *supply-side* populism. The demand side describes populist consequences that inevitably result from large changes in economic inequality within a population, and are most likely to affect those at the bottom of the economic ladder in the lower and middle classes.<sup>7</sup> The less economically secure “people” express backlash at the “elite” (those at the top) who they feel have rigged the system in their favour. Conversely, the supply side sees populist leaders adopt ideologies that tap into existing resentments among segments of the population such as racism or anti-immigration and provide convenient targets for their ire to explain the hardships in their lives.<sup>8</sup> The “people” then blame “the elite,” except instead blaming those with objectively the most power affecting their economic situation, they are frequently steered towards groups with minimal real power on their lives – made

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Graves and Jeff Smith, "Northern Populism: Causes and Consequences of the New Ordered Outlook," *The School of Public Policy Publications* (2020). 2.

<sup>6</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017). 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," *Harvard Kennedy School Working Paper no. RWP16-026* (2016). 2.

<sup>8</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser, 105.

successful due to extant resentments. These two extremes as drivers of populism are not mutually exclusive, and can easily interact depending on economic, social, and political factors.<sup>9</sup> Donald Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again" drew upon very real economic anxieties among his largely white, largely non-college educated voter base and directed them not at the government's corporate-friendly economic policies that were the real cause, but instead at immigrants taking their jobs, political correctness, and tax relief for the wealthiest individuals.<sup>10</sup>

On the left and demand side, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement of 2011 came about due to the rising progressive backlash against the US government's bailout of the wealthiest corporations in the country (Wall Street investment banks, General Motors) in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The government used unprecedented amounts of taxpayer money to rescue what was perceived as corporate malfeasance, poor judgement, and outright criminality. Combined with the total lack of criminal accountability (and instead bonuses for those responsible), and while the middle and lower classes faced most of the consequences in the form of home evictions, collapsing retirement savings and investments, and skyrocketing unemployment, semi-permanent protests in the heart of Wall Street and around the world took shape.<sup>11</sup> The populist core of this movement was obvious: the "elites" in the most profitable industry on the planet used their influence in government circles to obtain exceptional financial and legal treatment that would never be available to "the people" (i.e. lower and middle classes). It

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<sup>9</sup> Inglehart and Norris, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Pew Research Center, *An Examination of the 2016 Electorate, Based on Validated Voters*, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Occupy Wall Street in Perspective," *British Journal of Sociology* 64, no. 1 (2013). 2-3.

was a stark example of neoliberalism in action, where gains were privatized by those at the top, and losses were socialized by those at the bottom. The OWS motto of “We Are The 99%,” perfectly encapsulated the populist sentiment at play, drawing on the unprecedented levels of wealth inequality that had grown in Western democracies and pitting the bottom 99% of the people against the 1% elites.<sup>12</sup>

On the right and supply side, in 2016 Donald Trump’s improbable rise to power incorporated some of the strongest forms of right-wing populism. He openly espoused anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, nativist, anti-politician/establishment, and anti-intellectual sentiments to a portion of the population that was very thirsty for that elixir. His popularity set him apart from other Republicans when he would frequently acknowledge the economic pain facing his base, blame political “elites” who came before him (not without reason) and promise to return outsourced jobs (often lost as a result of free trade and globalized economic policies) and place “America First,” at least in rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> In practice once elected though, his greatest legislative success was a \$2.3 trillion tax cut bill that provided 60% of the relief to the top 20% of earners, while corporate taxes were cut by 40% - addressing none of the demand-side populist concerns of American voters.<sup>14</sup> The true danger of this unprecedented supply-side populism in American politics would become apparent on January 6, 2021, when American democracy itself was threatened after a Trump rally crowd stormed the U.S. Capitol while lawmakers were in the process

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Burns, Binyamin Appelbaum and Neil Irwin, "Donald Trump Vows to Create 25 Million Jobs Over Next Decade," *New York Times*, Sept 15, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Horsley, "After 2 Years, Trump Tax Cuts have Failed to Deliver on GOP's Promises," *National Public Radio*, Dec 20, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/20/789540931/2-years-later-trump-taxcuts-have-failed-to-deliver-on-gops-promises>.



of certifying the presidential election that Trump falsely claimed to have won. Though this Bastille<sup>15</sup>-storming has not been the norm in Western democracies, it offers a warning for nations with nascent populist elements of what could lie ahead without active mitigation measures. While the January 6 attack's violent and conspiracy-laden crowd attracted the most extreme of Trump supporters, a still-significant portion of his base held legitimate economic inequality anxieties,<sup>15</sup> and flocked to Trump's supply-side (and often racial) populism as a buffer and search for in-group connection.<sup>16</sup>

## POPULISM AND CANADA

Recent Canadian scholarship has identified three noteworthy right-wing populist movements in the past three decades: the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance, the Rob/Doug Ford "Ford Nation" in Ontario politics, and the People's Party of Canada. The latter two occupy similar ends of the ideological spectrum, but differ in their approaches to applying their thin populism that mask their thick core ideologies.<sup>17</sup> Rob and Doug Ford came from an influential family in Toronto and Ontario politics, and largely built their coalition among the middle-to-upper class suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Their populist appeals were frequently couched in appeals to the "common people all across the city" and how their opponents were "out of touch with the common person."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton famously estimated half of Trump supporters fall into a "basket of deplorables" – most driven by his supply-side populist rhetoric, while the other half were drawn in by his economic message but were not sufficiently put off by the more extreme Trump supporters. (Roxanne Roberts, "Hillary Clinton's 'deplorables' Speech Shocked Voters Five Years Ago — but some Feel it was Prescient," *Washington Post*, Aug 31, 2021.)

<sup>16</sup> Mark Fabian, Robert Breunig and Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, "Bowling with Trump: Economic Anxiety, Racial Identification, and Well-being in the 2016 Presidential Election," *IZA Discussion Papers*, no. 13022 (2020). 23. <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/216334>.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Erl, "The People and the Nation: The "Thick" and the "Thin" of Right-Wing Populism in Canada," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 1 (2021). 113.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford was particularly known for personally handling community problems after resident phone calls or tweets, bolstering his everyman persona.<sup>19</sup> They would appeal to populist resentment of city or provincial “elites,” which were frequently made out to be downtown Toronto residents (financial sector), cyclists (environmentalists), unions, and city bureaucrats who would “waste taxpayer money.”<sup>20</sup> Behind these thin appeals though, lay classic neoliberal right wing actions to cut city spending and services, reduce support for public transit,<sup>21</sup> and steer public money to businesses.<sup>22</sup>

The PPC, founded in 2018 by former Conservative cabinet minister Maxime Bernier, is a right-wing supply-side populist movement more in the Trumpian vein than Ford Nation. The party’s platform leading up to the 2019 and 2021 federal elections emphasized classic supply-side issues, including denouncing multiculturalism, restricting Canadian immigration policy, and in a bit of particularly Trumpian flair, calling for “no more political correctness.”<sup>23,23</sup> While one could not reasonably compare Canada’s levels of political fervor with that of the United States or some European nations in recent years, the PPC’s increasing popularity on the federal stage portends a concerning trend (the PPC national vote share increased from 1.6% in 2019 to 4.8% in 2021).<sup>24</sup> With violent and hateful rhetoric from PPC candidates against marginalized groups and the Prime

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Lakey, "If Something Needed Fixing, Rob Ford was a Good Guy to Call," *Toronto Star*, Mar 23, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Erl, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Editorial, "Rob Ford’s War on Public Transit," *Toronto Star*, Dec 30, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Rob Ferguson, Kristin Rushowy and Robert Benzie, "Ford Government Sent almost \$1B to Businesses Not Eligible for COVID-19 Aid," *Toronto Star*, Dec 1, 2021. <sup>23</sup> Erl, 113.

<sup>23</sup> Gillian Steward, "Echoes of Trump Resound at Bernier’s Calgary Rally," *Toronto Star*, Nov 12, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Elections Canada. "Past Elections," accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=pas&document=index&lang=e>.

Minister, this is not the norm in the Canadian political landscape and can contribute to real danger to Canadian institutions if leaders cannot control it.<sup>25,26</sup> This will be discussed below in the context of the 2022 Ottawa Freedom Convoy.

In terms of class and demographic traits as they relate to populist voting likelihood, quantitative analysis by Erl has shown that the Ford and PPC voting blocs attract voters from somewhat disparate population segments, though they do share some similar attitudes and ideologies. While Ford's constituency tends to attract voters from the suburbs (and thus with slightly higher incomes) and higher religiosity, the PPC's bloc tends to skew more male, lower income, and those with anti-Muslim sentiments. Common to both though are anti-feminist attitudes, lower education, and expressed dissatisfaction with democracy and the direction of the economy.<sup>27</sup> It is amongst this backdrop that the most significant populist developments took place in Canada: the COVID-19 and the trucker Freedom Convoy.

The COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, and at the time the medium- and long-term economic effects were not clear. Stock markets, global travel and supply chains, and employment levels all took heavy hits at the start – Canadian unemployment nearly tripled from February to May 2020,<sup>28</sup> and the Canadian Gross Domestic Product

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<sup>25</sup> Guy Quenneville, "People's Party of Canada Candidate in Sask. Slammed Over Call for More 'Hate Speech'," accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/peoples-party-codypayant-bernier-1.5230152>.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmar Khan, "Attack on Trudeau Unsurprising, Experts Say, Warning of Future Violence Against Politicians," accessed Apr 30, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8172664/national-security-attacktrudeau-future/>.

<sup>27</sup> Erl, 115-117.

<sup>28</sup> Statistics Canada, "Labor Force Survey, September 2021," accessed Apr 29, 2022, <https://www150-statcan-gc-ca.cfc.idm.oclc.org/n1/daily-quotidien/211008/dq211008a-eng.htm>.

(GDP) declined by 11.3% (annualized) in 2021 Q1, and 5.3% in 2020 overall.<sup>29</sup> The Canadian government responded quickly with targeted economic assistance to individuals and businesses most affected by the opening/closing/restriction roller coaster that followed the COVID waves. Unemployment would return to pre-pandemic levels some months later,<sup>30</sup> along with vaccine development and increased research on public health measures; but due to a variety of factors, many countries, including Canada, would experience severe labor shortages, frequently at the lower pay scales, that threaten several employment sectors. Texas A&M professor Anthony M. Klotz coined this phenomenon “The Great Resignation” in May 2021, and it described the widespread trend of workers voluntarily leaving their jobs during the pandemic, claiming dissatisfaction with working conditions, desire for improved employment elsewhere, and a labor power imbalance shifting towards the worker.<sup>31</sup>

The United States has seen resignation rates rise almost 50% from pre-pandemic levels, with many claiming working-class concerns such as pandemic complications to work-home life, lack of child care, early retirement, and a desire not to work.<sup>33</sup> Governments, institutions, and employers (“the establishment”) were not prepared for the extent of the attitudinal realignment of the working class during a time of vastly increased work from home arrangements and lockdowns/school closures. Workers formed new

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<sup>29</sup> World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %) - Canada," accessed Apr 28, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2020&locations=CA&start=1961&view=chart>.

<sup>30</sup> Statistics Canada, "Labor Force Survey, September 2021"

<sup>31</sup> Dave Jorgenson, "The Great Resignation with Molly M. Anderson, Anthony C. Klotz, PhD & Elaine Welteroth," *Washington Post*, Sept 24, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-postlive/2021/09/24/transcript-great-resignation-with-molly-m-anderson-anthony-c-klotz-phd-elaine-welteroth/>. <sup>33</sup> Alyssa Fowers and Andrew Van Dam, "The most Unusual Job Market in Modern American History, Explained," *Washington Post*, Dec 29, 2021.

expectations about what fulfilling work-life balance can look like, and as costs for many goods began to rise and job openings expanded, this was the impetus needed for many to leave their current jobs for something better. This, combined with increasing inflation, unprecedented housing prices, and cost of living increases, 100 million more people fell into poverty, and overall wealth inequality became much worse. At the same time, the world's billionaires saw their wealth rise by \$4.4 trillion.<sup>32</sup> For many people, the middle class dream of home ownership, stable employment, success for their children, and comfortable retirement is increasingly out of reach. Although Canada has not experienced similar resignation numbers to the U.S., more than half of businesses have reported being unable to hire at required levels, forcing increases to pay and benefits and increasing competition for other businesses' workers.<sup>33</sup> Canada should also expect many of the same reasons driving the Great Resignation in the U.S to apply to its workforce as well, and drive similar sentiments.

The Great Resignation and other employment and social trends during COVID-19 are in essence part of a populist movement partly driven by lower-to-middle classes facing their disillusionment with the demise of the middle class dream. A recent Ipsos poll found that 67% of Canadians agree that owning a home is only for the rich. 76% of non-homeowners expressed the same.<sup>34</sup> They are exercising a rare and newfound sense of power over the corrupt elites, amidst two years of a pandemic where people have

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, "COVID has made Global Inequality Much Worse," accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/covid-has-made-global-inequality-much-worse/>.

<sup>33</sup> David Lao, "Canadian Small Businesses Face Labor Shortage Despite Wage Hike, Report Finds," accessed Jan 20, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8434654/canada-small-businesses-labor-report/>.

<sup>34</sup> Craig Lord, "63% of Canadian Non-Owners have 'given Up' on Ever Buying a Home: Ipsos," accessed 3 May, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8794099/canada-real-estate-giving-up-owning-home/>.

relinquished much of their autonomy and power to governments that have not always done the best job at communicating clearly and with competence. When this disillusionment of elites is combined with groups who are predisposed to supply side populist sentiments, and a lower likelihood of trusting institutions, education, and expertise, the introduction of a new vaccine faster and with wider distribution than ever before provided fertile ground for a populist flashpoint in Canada.

### **Freedom Convoy: Canada's COVID Spring**

In January 2022, after Canada and the United States implemented requirements for truck drivers to be vaccinated against COVID-19, a convoy of truckers was organized via social media to drive from Canada's west coast to Ottawa, to demand the removal of all further COVID-19 restrictions and mandates, including for vaccinations. A significant anti-vaccination movement had been growing in Canada and other nations for some time. Governments at all levels had made the provision of some services and participation in many activities contingent upon being vaccinated in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, including air/rail travel, indoor dining, and public events, and made vaccination a mandatory employment requirement for government employees, including the military. Many private businesses also made employment contingent on vaccination, with the associated legal challenges consistently upheld in courts. And while this is not meant to imply that all vaccine-hesitant people are populists, or that all populists are

vaccine-hesitant, research has found that those with vaccine-hesitant views are more likely to display populist sentiments.<sup>35</sup>

Many of these anti-vaxxers now found themselves shut out from participation in much of the society they had known for all their lives, and had their employment and economic prospects limited in a way that the rest of the pro-vaccine population had not, with minimal indication of when and how government COVID restrictions would recede. For people who were already predisposed to distrusting authorities and “the elites,” it is not surprising that they would display some strong protest actions. It is not difficult to be sympathetic with many of their concerns (if not their methods), if you put aside the value proposition/cost-benefit analysis that many pro-vaccine/COVID restriction supporters had arrived at: that the loss of some freedoms and the increased trust needed in the scientific and public health authorities for vaccines is justified in order to most effectively return the world to a pre-pandemic state while providing the most safety for the most people. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, research in Europe had demonstrated a very strong correlation between support for populist political movements and vaccine hesitancy.<sup>36</sup> The right-wing populist sentiment of deep distrust in elites by these (frequently economically) marginalized groups has extended to scientific and medical experts who have professional and ethical obligations to the public.

The Freedom Convoy proceeded to occupy much of the downtown Ottawa area for a month, and also disrupted and blocked several U.S. border crossings across

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<sup>35</sup> Almudena Recio-Román, Manuel Recio-Menéndez and María Victoria Román-González, "Vaccine Hesitancy and Political Populism. an Invariant Cross-European Perspective," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 24 (2021). 10.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Kennedy, "Populist Politics and Vaccine Hesitancy in Western Europe: An Analysis of National-Level Data," *European Journal of Public Health* 29, no. 3 (2019). 515.

Canada.<sup>37</sup> Social media played a large part – organized and coordinated on Facebook, Rumble, and Twitter, amplified nationally and internationally by Facebook’s algorithm in particular, and funded (both legally and illegally) via online crowdsourcing platforms GoFundMe and GiveSendGo.<sup>38</sup> The publically-stated purpose and main goal of the convoy was for “...all levels of Canadian government to stop the use of vaccine passports, waive fines linked to COVID-19 and reinstate employees who were fired for breaking COVID-19 rules,”<sup>39</sup> However, this message was undermined throughout the convoy with media reports on convoy organizers and affiliated groups that advocated various unrelated right-wing messages such as the overthrow of the entire government, removal of Prime Minister Trudeau, demanding federal control of provincial jurisdictions, waving Nazi/Confederate flags, etc.<sup>40</sup> The convoy, largely left alone by police until their eventual removal on February 23, 2022, was extremely disruptive to downtown Ottawa residents and businesses – residents were subjected to constant hornblaring, blocked roads, and threats of violence, and many downtown businesses remained closed for weeks, costing millions of dollars. U.S. border blockades cost the Canadian economy hundreds of millions of dollars in trade every day. It was not until after the government’s controversial decision to invoke the *Emergencies Act* for the first time ever that a coordinated police effort was able to break up the protests.

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<sup>37</sup> Sammy Westfall, "Here's what You Need to Know about the 'Freedom Convoy' in Canada," *Washington Post*, Feb 7, 2022. <https://go.exlibris.link/qp05HNDS>.

<sup>38</sup> Ryan Broderick, "How Facebook Twisted Canada’s Trucker Convoy into an International Movement," accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2022/2/19/22941291/facebook-canadatrucker-convoy-gofundme-groups-viral-sharing>.

<sup>39</sup> Rachel Parent, "Freedom Convoy Plans to Gridlock Ottawa Until all Vaccine Mandates Repealed," *National Post*, Jan 27, 2022. <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/were-done-with-mandatesfreedom-convoy-vows-no-violence-as-up-to-2000-vehicles-head-for-ottawa>.

<sup>40</sup> Broderick, 2022.



Public opinion during the Freedom Convoy was not on the participants' side.

Polls during the protest indicated that over two thirds of Canadians did not approve of the convoy and supported their removal.<sup>41</sup> This is not surprising, as the right-wing rhetoric behind much of their messaging is not part of the mainstream Canadian public discourse. But that doesn't mean they couldn't have had much wider support for some of their very real demand-side populist concerns. Peter McLaren, writing for *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, described this well:

In their emphasis on freedom, however, there was little acknowledgement among the truckers of how capitalism shapes the larger struggle of workingclass Canadians. There was little admission that their struggle was, essentially, a class struggle and had to do with a concrete meeting of needs and collective control over or access to common goods and resources needed for survival and dignity, and access to and safeguards for subsistence—in other words, there was little exercise of class consciousness among the truckers. There is massive inflation affecting workers, and rising household debt, so there is plenty to complain about.<sup>42</sup>

While the Freedom Convoy did not result in widespread violence on the scale of the January 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection, any real threat to a democracy such as Canada's does not chiefly come from the physical act itself, but from unchallenged and unconstrained spread of the supply-side populist ideas behind them. This description of a threat is meant to be distinct from any threat to a sitting government using established democratic processes via free speech, peaceable assembly, and electoral processes. Such threats, particularly with demand-side populist underpinnings, should be considered

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<sup>41</sup> Christopher Nardi, "Two-Thirds of Canadians Support use of Emergencies Act and Want Freedom Convoy Cleared Out: Poll," *National Post*, Feb 17, 2022. <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/two-thirds-of-canadians-support-use-of-emergencies-act-and-wantfreedom-convoy-cleared-out-poll>.

<sup>42</sup> Peter McLaren, "Some Thoughts on Canada's 'Freedom Convoy' and the Settler Colonial State," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2022). 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2051478>.

healthy forms of government accountability in a mature democracy. It is this form of populism that should be considered as the chief populist threat to the CAF's mandate, which will now be explored further.

## **POPULISM AND THE CAF**

This author has previously argued that the CAF is in the midst of a “second decade of darkness,” driven chiefly by the post-Afghanistan peace dividend, the ongoing misconduct and culture crisis, and COVID-19-driven social, retention, and recruitment challenges.<sup>43</sup> The latter two factors have clear populist elements to them that threaten the long-term mandate of the CAF.

COVID-19 has been an extremely challenging time for the CAF. Starting in March 2020, following public health measures the CAF would implement a series of training slow- and shutdowns over the next several months, affecting everything from recruit basic training to advanced combat and pilot training. Combined with increasing attrition rates during the pandemic, this has resulted in the CAF being down almost 12,000 Regular and Reserve Force positions as of January 2022 – a 71% increase since December 2020 alone, while the most recent defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* had instead directed an overall increase in CAF manning.<sup>44</sup> With the operational tempo not decreasing (missions remained in Iraq, Latvia, Ukraine, new COVID-19 missions as part of Ops LASER and VECTOR, as well as significantly increased Op LENTUS responding

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<sup>43</sup> Maj Peter Horan, *The Canadian Armed Forces and a Second Decade of Darkness: Is it here, and what does it Mean?* (Toronto: Canadian Forces College, 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Canadian Press, "Military Dealing with More than 10,000 Unfilled Positions Amid Growing Pressures," *National Post*, Jan 18, 2022. <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/military-dealing-with-more-than-10000-unfilled-positions-amid-growing-pressures>.

to Canadian natural disasters), remaining members had to do even more with less. As well, one side effect of the CAF's move to remote work for much of its workforce for months at a time, was engendering a sense of resentment among its many "essential" workers who by nature of their work could not go remote (aircraft/vehicle technicians, ship/aircrew, intelligence staff) and thus could not enjoy the benefits of increased worklife flexibility and family time experienced by many of their office-bound colleagues. In effect, two classes of workers were created, providing fertile ground for populist resentments to grow. When this is combined with the extant social and economic trends of the Great Resignation affecting Canadian society writ large, disillusioned CAF members for whom release/retirement is an option suddenly have an incentive to make a change.

Further on the economic front, with housing prices that have increased by more than 30% since 2020 and the associated rise in cost of living, this has greatly outpaced the pay levels of military members. It is at the point that housing and living costs are an acute problem for CAF leadership, who are frequently at the whims other governmental departments such as Treasury Board for housing, allowance, and compensation policy.<sup>45</sup> And so what was once a realistic career path into the middle class, without governmentwide action and acknowledgement of some of the unique employment pressures put on military families, many of the CAF's most junior members will not be able to afford to live on a military salary. If the CAF leadership is not seen to be seriously

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<sup>45</sup> Lee Berthiaume, "Military Members Feeling Bite of Skyrocketing Housing, Living Costs: Defence Chief," *The Canadian Press*, Apr 14, 2022. <https://www.thestar.com/politics/2022/04/14/topcommander-warns-canadian-military-stretched-thin-amid-growing-threats.html>.

addressing this key economic issue for the troops, it has the potential to create significant discipline problems, even higher attrition rates, or both.

At the same time these COVID effects are taking place, since February 2021 the CAF has been facing sexual and behavioral misconduct allegations with numerous senior officers, including a currently-serving and former Chief of Defence Staff.<sup>46</sup> This has coincided with a broader CAF-wide reckoning into sexual misconduct, systemic racism, discrimination, and treatment of marginalized groups.<sup>47</sup> Numerous General/Flag Officers have been publicly accused of an array of misconduct with varying legal consequences, resulting in a cascade of senior leadership instability and a serious reckoning within the ranks of the ethics, value, and integrity of the senior Chain of Command. This has already caused several resignations from the CAF by high-profile female members, and is likely to have a cascading effect on other members.<sup>48</sup>

This CAF misconduct crisis, and the resultant manning shortfalls that have directly and indirectly resulted, have a clear demand-side populist element to them: backlash against the elite class (senior leaders/General Officers) by an oppressed minority (women) or underclass (women, minorities, marginalized groups, and more junior ranks). Indeed, the military can be looked at as a series of have vs. have-not class struggles: officer (elites) vs. NCMs (common people); senior (officers and NCO) vs. junior (young

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<sup>46</sup> Murray Brewster, "Eyre Blames Sexual Misconduct Crisis, Pandemic for Shrinking Military," last modified Oct 26, accessed Jan 19, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/wayne-eyre-armed-forcessexual-misconduct-pandemic-1.6224791>.

<sup>47</sup> Department of National Defence, *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination – Final Report* (Ottawa: 2022).

<sup>48</sup> David Pugliese, "Senior Female Canadian Forces Officer Quits Military in Disgust Over Sexual Misconduct Allegations," *The Ottawa Citizen*, Mar 16, 2021. <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/senior-female-canadian-forces-officer-quitsmilitary-in-disgust-over-sexual-misconduct-allegations>.

corporal/privates and junior officers); specialists (pilots, SOF, SAR Techs – elites) vs. generalists (common people). In good times, with steady leadership, leaning on a mutually understood military ethos and the reinforcement of camaraderie and the military as one big team will keep these sentiments at bay. But with all the additional stresses facing the CAF as previously mentioned, it may not have the internal discipline and fortitude to stave off a populist uprising. It is not suggested that such an uprising would take the form of a mutiny or anything so dramatic, but rather the form of continually increasing attrition rates, decreased ability to recruit, and decreased public support for joining the CAF, that would erode the human resource capacity of the CAF to accomplish its mandate.

In terms of threats to the CAF's mandate, it is important to discuss the right-wing extremist and racist incidents that have been publicized in recent years. There have been several reports of current or former CAF members with active ties to right-wing extremist groups, the most high-profile of which was MCpl Patrik Matthews, who was recently sentenced to nine years in prison in the U.S. for this participation in the neo-Nazi group The Base and plans to conduct a mass killing.<sup>49</sup> The CAF also had a nexus with the Freedom Convoy, with two members of the JTF-2 special operations unit (who were also in the process of being released from the CAF for refusing to be vaccinated for COVID) being investigated for their public participation.<sup>50</sup> Such participation in political activity

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<sup>49</sup> Sarah Petz, "U.S. Judge Sentences Manitoban Ex-Reservist Patrik Mathews to 9 Years in Prison for Role in Neo-Nazi Plot," accessed Apr 27, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/patrik-mathews-sentencing-1.6226116>.

<sup>50</sup> Eric Stober, "Trucker Convoy: 2 Members of Counter-Terrorism Unit Under Probe for Alleged Involvement," accessed Apr 29, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8616892/trucker-convoy-militarymembers-probe/>.

as visible CAF members, particularly in one with such anti-government messaging, is unacceptable in a military properly and lawfully subordinate to civilian control. More broadly, with the recent study on systemic racism and discrimination, the problem appears to be more widespread than isolated incidents would suggest. However, while this is seriously concerning behavior (with supply-side populist elements) for a professional and accountable military such as Canada's, it is unlikely to rival the scale of the widespread internal dissent, morale deterioration, and manning shortages that the demand-side populist elements present.

For many of the external pressures facing the CAF (COVID, housing, cost of living), CAF members are not unique from other Canadians, and can exercise their employment and economic autonomy in similar ways. CAF and government leaders have a unique responsibility to recognize economic threats to CAF members in ways that go beyond those facing the broader public, and have the potential to threaten Canada's national security capacity. To address this, leaders must be willing to recognize that CAF members occupy a unique position in Canada and the public service, and be willing to implement novel employment and compensation policies not necessarily available to other government employees or the average Canadian. This will naturally raise equity concerns, and require public support for military members that is normally absent in Canadian political discourse. Military housing must be made cheaper, cost of living should be normalized across the CAF regardless of posting location, salaries should be competitive with similar civilian roles (see recent pilot pay increases), and family support and flexibility should be greatly increased. And of course, the CAF's current culture change initiatives to address misconduct and systemic bias must bear fruit in order to be a

desirable employer for younger generations. In the current environment, the military does not have the luxury of relying on the national service/patriotism argument for why CAF members should accept lower standards of employment than other civilian opportunities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Populism is an increasingly powerful force in the politics of many Western nations, as decades of neoliberal economic policies have increased wealth inequality and resentment of the elite class to new levels. It is not necessarily unique to either side of the political spectrum, but the sentiments with which politicians and leaders can approach populism can be from the demand side of economic insecurity and appeals to the economic prioritization of the lower classes over the elites, or from the supply side of out-group resentment, nativism, or rejection of expertise and intellectualism through appeals to the common sense of the people. Charismatic leaders have used these strategies to lead popular movements, with at time disruptive results that can threaten the stability of some democratic institutions. Though not to the same degree as other nations, Canada has also seen a rise in these sentiments during the socially and economically turbulent times of COVID-19, with a fractured job market and labor shortage, and an energized right-wing populist movement pushing back against public health measures that they see as critical losses of freedom – from the rise of the People’s Party of Canada, to the Ottawa Freedom Convoy.

The CAF has not been immune to these effects, as the confluence of internal and external challenges threaten its ability to meet its long term mandate of effective service of Canada’s defence interests. The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenging working conditions and very strained economic realities, and the broader labor phenomenon of the

Great Resignation has resulted in the CAF dangerously short on people to meet its obligations. This, along with the misconduct and culture crises, are resulting in demandside populist resentments within the ranks against the elites that have allowed the status quo to devolve so much. These threaten further and unsustainable morale decreases, reduced retention, and a tarnished CAF image that is unattractive to new recruits. In addition to promoting the inherent honor in serving one's country, the CAF needs an employment, living, and economic landscape that stays competitive with its civilian counterpart. CAF and government leaders need to recognize that while problems facing CAF members may not be that different from other Canadians, the national ramifications of having a military workforce incapable of keeping people are too great to treat with the same urgency as any other public service policy.



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